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ABSTRACT

Addressing teacher educators, this paper describes the importance of story as a reflective teaching tool, and provides brief annotations of 11 children's picture books (published between 1989 and 1998) which have reading as a critical story element. The children's picture books listed in this paper can be used to assist teachers in analyzing their views and assumptions of teaching and learning. These books are examples of the important role reading plays in the lives of others. Questions that might be useful to pose when discussing these books include: how is reading portrayed? why is reading important? what theories of reading are suggested by the story? how did the character learn to read? why did they want to read? and how does this story expand our view of literacy? (Contains 13 references to children's literature and 9 references to professional resources.) (RS)

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READING ABOUT READING: USING CHILDREN'S LITERATURE TO REFLECT ON READING

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The more that you read,
the more things you will know.
The more that you learn,
the more places you'll go.
(Seuss, 1978 Unnumbered page)

This quote from, *I Can Read with my Eyes Shut!* (Seuss, 1978), captures a critical perspective on reading; that reading has the power to transform and enrich the lives of children and adults. Children's literature has the power to change the lives of students as they learn to read and discover the joys of reading. These same books, however, have the potential to enhance teacher preparation, as stories are studied by preservice and inservice teachers (who collectively I will refer to as teachers throughout this article).

As teacher educators, we know it is important to expose teachers to quality children's literature. We often use these books in our classrooms to model instruction, whether to teach a reading strategy or as a literature discussion "Grand Conversation" (Eeds and Wells, 1989). In addition to these important uses, however, children's books can also be utilized to assist teachers in understanding their views of what it means to be literate and have the opportunity to reflect on their own beliefs and assumptions about teaching and learning. Using children's literature in this way is especially important, since as Johnston and Allington (1991) argue, "Teachers' beliefs and expectations, particularly about individual differences between learners, have direct and indirect, positive and negative influences on children's learning." (p. 996)

If assisting teachers in analyzing their beliefs and assumptions about teaching and learning is important, how then can teacher educators assist in the process? One way in which this analysis can take place is through the reading and discussing of children's literature. The focus of this article is to describe the importance of story as a reflective teaching tool. In addition, this article will annotate selected children's picture books which have reading as a critical story element.

Why Stories?

Recent research suggests that stories, or narratives, provide teachers with an opportunity to make sense of teaching and learning (Carter, 1993; Clandinin, 1993; Doyle & Holm, 1998). Bruner (1986) suggests that a story provides a "map of possible roles and possible worlds in which action, thought, and self-definition are possible (or desirable)" (p. 66) This "map" is not predetermined or defined. This indeterminacy is what gives stories such power as reflective tools.

Rosenblatt (1976) views text (of which story is one form), as critical to understanding others. As she writes in the third edition of *Literature as Exploration*:

> As the student vicariously shares through literature the emotions and aspirations of other human beings, he can gain heightened sensitivity to the needs and problems of others remote from him in temperament, in space, or in social environments; he can develop a greater imaginative capacity to grasp the meaning of abstract laws or political and social theories for actual human lives. (p. 274)

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The reader, from Rosenblatt's (1978, 1983) perspective, actively constructs meaning through a transaction with potential text; a text which is shaped and influenced by the reader's past experiences, assumptions, and beliefs. Thus, the analysis of the potential meanings found in stories is critical to the process of using children's literature with teachers. For it is through discussion with others that we are able to expand our understandings and critically reflect on the beliefs and assumptions we hold.

The children's picture books which I have listed in this article can be used to assist teachers in analyzing their views and assumptions of teaching and learning. These books are powerful examples of the important role reading plays in the lives of others. Questions that might be useful to pose when discussing these books might include: How is reading portrayed? Why is reading important? What theories of reading are suggested by the story? How did the character learn to read? Why did they want to read? How does this story expand our view of literacy?

Although these discussion questions are important to ask to assist teachers in exploring their views of teaching and learning, an even more important question one might is, how would this process be conceptualized with a real book? To answer this question, I have selected *When Will I Read?* (Cohen, 1977) as an example of the analysis that teachers might engage in while using the books suggested in this article.

The story, *When Will I Read?* (Cohen, 1977), is about Jim, a first grader who does not view himself as a reader. The story takes place in a first grade classroom with a supportive teacher. She has organized the classroom for literacy development in the following ways: 1) signs in the classroom, such as "Don't let the hamsters out" and "Please put the blocks back when you are done." 2) supporting students who "read" illustrations as emergent readers, 3) having a play area where children go to read to dolls, 4) and writing down a language a experience story for the students to read. By the end of the story, Jim realizes that he is a reader.

In analyzing this story, some dominate literacy themes emerge. In exploring these themes, I will answer the aforementioned questions. How is reading portrayed? Reading in this classroom is portrayed as a developmental process. Throughout the story, students are supported in their reading behaviors and freedom to explore an environment in which the teacher values literacy. Why is reading important? Read is important in the classroom as a form of communication, as a way to record classroom events, and something very natural to the classroom environment. How did the character learn to read? At first, Jim did not think he was a reader. However, in time, he came to realize that his ability to read signs was an example of his ability to read. Why did he want to read? It is not clear from the story. We could surmise, that as a first grader, he felt that he should be a reader as a result of what we know about the pressure to learn to read from parents. How does this story expand our view of literacy? This story demonstrates the importance of a knowledgeable teacher in being available to help students learn to read. The story suggests that an appropriate instructional environment includes language experience stories, play areas, and lots of books for children to read.

This is but a brief example of the type of elements that might be gleaned from the stories in this article. The following selected list is provided to give the reader a place to start in exploring other books which have reading as an important theme.

Children's Picture Books with a Theme of Reading

Amber on the Mountain (Johnston, 1994). The mountains in which Amber lives are both a beautiful and lonesome place-until Anna arrives. Anna and Amber have a great time doing things together. In time, Anna teachers Amber to read. Amber is sad, however, when Anna's family moves away. She wants to write Anna a letter, but does not know how to write. In time, Amber teaches herself how to write and sends Anna a letter.

A Weave of Words (San Souci, 1998). Prince Vachagan must learn to read, write, and weave before marrying the beautiful and wise Anait. The story focuses on Vachagan's perseverance in accomplishing these three tasks and how, in learning to read, write, and weave, he helps Anait effect his rescue from an evil three-headed monster.

Good Books, Good Times! (Hopkins, 1990). A wonderful collection of poems, by such poets as Arnold Lobel, Jack Prelutsky, and David McCord, which share the joy of reading.

More Than Anything Else (Bradley, 1995). More than anything else, Booker wants to learn to read. And yet, few people in 1865 Malden, West Virginia are able to read. In time, Booker learns to read from a man who teaches him the "sounds the marks make." A moving story of the young life of Booker T. Washington.

Pink and Say (Polacco, 1994).The story of Sheldon Curtis (Say), a fifteen year old Union soldier who is nursed back to health by Moe Moe Bay (a former slave) and her son Pinkus Aylee (Pink). Pink, who learned to read from his former master, teaches Say to read. In time, Pink and Say are captured by Confederate troops and imprisoned in Andersonville; a place where Pink dies. The story is based on Polacco's great-great grandfather Sheldon. Caution: Have a Kleenex available after reading this story.

Richard Wright and the Library Card (Miller, 1997). This story describes Richard Wright, who later authored many stories and books including *Native Son*, desire to read and the frustration he experienced being denied access to the public library because he was an African American living in the segregated South during the 1920's. The story focuses on his determination to read and the aid a white co-worker provided to assist Richard in his desire to read.

Read for me, Mama (Rahaman, 1997) Joseph wants his mother to read to him but his mother always has an excuse. As the story progresses, mama admits that she can not read and yet realizes that she needs to learn. As she explains in the story, "I have to learn to read, " she said. "My boy needs a mama who can read. But I never practiced up my reading, never learnt it good in school, and it all got lost from my mind, all got lost." (Rahaman, 1997 Unpaged) The story ends with mama going to reading class and reading Joseph a book.

Santa's Book of Names (McPhail, 1993) Edward has trouble reading. He wants to read but is just not quite able to. On Christmas Eve, Edward finds Santa's book of names. He returns it to Santa, and when Santa loses his glasses, must read off the names and gifts from the book so Santa can deliver presents. A sequel to this book is *Edward and the Pirates* (McPhail, 1997). Now that

Edward has learned to read, he reads everything in sight. One evening, when he falls asleep reading a book about pirate treasure, he is awaken by pirates who need Edward to read the book to them so they can find lost pirate treasure. A wonderful story connecting reading and the imagination.

Thank you, Mr. Falker (Polocco, 1998). Patricia Polocco describes the pain she endured as she went through school unable to read. The story follows her school experiences from kindergarten into fifth grade. In fifth grade she teacher who identifies her reading problem and helps her to become a reader. The ending is especially poignant as she describes a chance meeting with this former teacher. Caution: Another story where a Kleenex will be needed.

The Wednesday Surprise (Bunting, 1989). Anna and her grandmother read together every Wednesday night. The surprise is presented, to both the reader and the characters, grandma stand up to read to her son (Ann's father). We learn that grandma decided she wanted to learn how to read, and so came to Anna as her teacher. Another Kleenex story.

Tomas and the Library Lady (Mora, 1997) Tomas knows all of grandfather's stories. As a result, Papa Grande suggests that Tomas go to the library to learn new stories to share with the family. Through the help of a librarian, to whom Tomas teaches Spanish, Tomas is soon reading and sharing numerous types of books with his family. Based on the life of Tomas Rivera, who became the chancellor of the University California at Riverside.

Conclusion

As teacher educators, it is important that we understand that the teachers with whom we work hold various beliefs and assumptions about teaching and learning. If we are to assist teachers in reflecting on their beliefs and assumptions, we must have tools available which will generate thoughtful inquiry into teaching and learning. One such tool is children literature. The stories that are highlighted in this article provide opportunities for reflective discussions concerning reading. These stories challenge the reader to reflect on beliefs and assumptions held about teaching and learning and emphasize the power reading holds for all learners.

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